

THE IMPACT OF THE PROMOTION OF OHRID AT INTERNATIONAL TOURISM FAIRS ON OVERNIGHT STAYS AND ARRIVALS IN THE COUNTRY AND THE SOUTHWEST REGION

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Abstract: The Ohrid Region, inscribed by UNESCO as a mixed World Heritage Site, embodies a unique synergy of natural and cultural values. As one of only thirty-eight sites worldwide with this status, the region possesses outstanding universal values that demand continuous protection. This paper examines the impact of Ohrid's participation in international tourism fairs on the growth of tourist demand, focusing on the period from 2013 to 2023, during which the Municipality of Ohrid actively engaged in fairs and exhibitions. Collaboration with the Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism facilitated numerous international presentations. The methodology entails a synthesis of data provided by the Municipality of Ohrid and official statistical bodies. Figures on foreign arrivals and overnight stays, drawn from the State Statistical Office, underpin the analysis and ensure research credibility. A time-series analysis was applied to monitor trends in arrivals and overnight stays as key components of tourist traffic. Promotional activities from 2013 to 2023 were systematically mapped, and two parallel analyses were conducted to depict foreign arrivals and overnight stays at both national and regional levels (Southwest Planning Region).

Results reveal a pronounced increase in overnight stays following intensified promotional efforts, particularly in years marked by active fair presentations and coordinated national-local initiatives. The analysis indicates that fair-based promotion, leveraging the site's exceptional universal values, strengthens international interest and significantly enhances Ohrid's visibility on the global tourism market. The positive correlation between fair promotion and tourist demand growth underscores the importance of strategic marketing interventions. It is concluded that systematic representation of Ohrid at international fairs contributes to the sustainable development of tourism.

Recommendations include maintaining the integrity and authenticity of outstanding universal values in all promotional activities; strengthening inter-institutional coordination to optimize operational processes; and aligning marketing strategies with UNESCO principles to improve visitor perceptions. Updating mechanisms for collecting and analyzing tourism data will bolster accountability and effectiveness. The integration of advanced big-data analytics offers new opportunities for trend forecasting, while engaging the local community through educational and participatory initiatives enhances social sustainability. A long-term vision should incorporate the development of sustainability indicators to measure policy efficacy. This study provides a scientific foundation for further analyses and strategic interventions and enriches scholarly debate while guiding practical policy decisions.

Keywords: Ohrid, UNESCO, branding, tourism promotion, overnight stays, international fairs.

1. INTRODUCTION

The Municipality of Ohrid annually allocates dedicated budgets within its tourism and local economic development programs to support destination promotion and marketing. These efforts aim to strengthen regional initiatives and foster cooperation among stakeholders at local and international levels, in order to develop internationally competitive tourism products (Municipality of Ohrid, 2023).

Promotion activities encompass both traditional and modern methods, including direct and indirect representation of Ohrid at international fairs and tourism exchanges (Jovanovski & Petrovska, 2021). Ohrid's participation in global promotional events is coordinated with the Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism, a national institution established in 2008. The Agency prioritizes increasing the visibility of North Macedonia as an authentic and sustainable tourism destination, aligning its activities with the strategic frameworks of the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO, 2021).

Through its promotional and support sectors, the Agency implements media campaigns, organizes information tours, and facilitates presence at international fairs, alongside offering subsidies and project support for tourism development (Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism, 2022).

The present study explores the impact of promotional activities with a particular focus on international fair participation. Specifically, it examines the representation of Ohrid and its UNESCO designation in foreign tourism markets, assessing whether these promotional efforts correlate with increased recognition and visitation. The

objective is to provide an evidence-based evaluation of promotional strategies and their role in enhancing the destination's competitiveness and visibility (UNESCO, 2020; Ivanov, 2023).

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

This study analyzes the promotional efforts for Ohrid as a UNESCO World Heritage destination by examining its participation in international tourism fairs between 2013 and 2023. The research methodology combines quantitative and qualitative approaches to assess potential correlations between fair-based promotional activities and tourism performance indicators (Ivanov & Richards, 2022; UNWTO, 2021).

Data were collected from official records of the Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism and the Municipality of Ohrid, which annually documents its promotional initiatives within tourism and local economic development programs (Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism, 2022; Municipality of Ohrid, 2023).

Statistical data regarding foreign arrivals and overnight stays were obtained from MAKSTAT (State Statistical Office of North Macedonia, 2023), complemented by regional tourism reports and heritage evaluation frameworks (Jovanovski & Petrovska, 2021; UNESCO, 2020).

The analysis focuses on identifying trends and potential shifts in visitation patterns corresponding with promotional engagement. No experimental interventions were applied; however, synthesis of participation records and tourism statistics provides a basis for evaluating the effectiveness of the promotional strategy. Methods from prior heritage and tourism evaluation studies were referenced to support indicator selection and interpretation, with relevant adjustments made to fit the regional context.

3. RESULTS

Between 2013 and 2023, North Macedonia recorded a steady growth in international tourist arrivals and overnight stays, with significant contribution from promotional activities at international fairs. According to official tourism statistics and own analysis, the most frequent foreign visitors to the country during the analyzed period originated from Turkey, Serbia, Greece, Bulgaria, the Netherlands, Germany, and Poland.

The Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism and the Municipality of Ohrid coordinated representation at key international fairs, with consistent participation in EMITT (Istanbul) and Izmir, especially in the years 2013, 2014, 2016, 2018, and 2022. In Serbia, promotion occurred annually, with notable presence in Belgrade, Kragujevac, and Niš. No formal promotional activities were recorded in Greece, although Greek tourists traditionally visited Ohrid during religious holidays. Promotional efforts in the Netherlands, Germany, and Poland were active until 2019, with partial post-COVID continuity in virtual or resumed fairs.

Overnight stay data revealed that the top ten foreign tourists by duration were visitors from Turkey, the Netherlands, Serbia, Greece, Poland, Bulgaria, Germany, Albania, Kosovo, and Croatia. The variation in ranking compared to arrival figures suggests the influence of package arrangements, some supported by charter flight subsidies during the studied period.

In the Southwestern region—where Ohrid is the dominant destination—the ranking differed slightly. The top nationalities visiting Ohrid were Turkey, the Netherlands, Poland, Serbia, Bulgaria, Albania, Greece, Kosovo, Germany, and Other Asian countries. In terms of overnight stays in Ohrid, the leading nationalities were the Netherlands, Turkey, Poland, Serbia, Albania, Bulgaria, Kosovo, Greece, Israel, and Germany. Israeli tourists stood out with 127,104 overnight stays between 2013 and 2019.

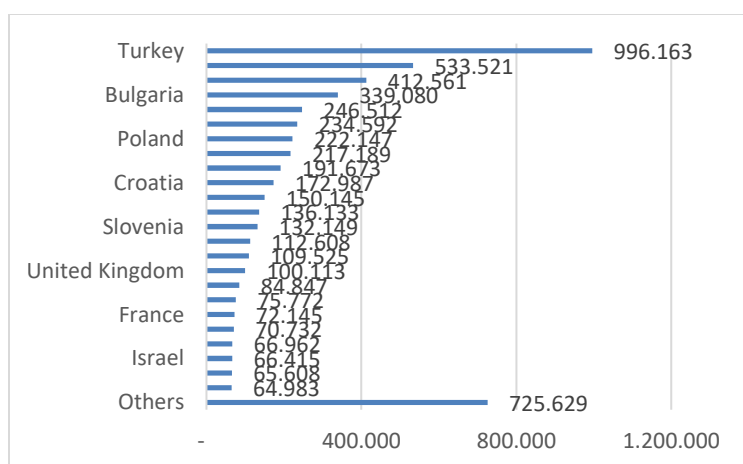
Average overnight stay calculations indicated that Dutch tourists stayed the longest (6.2 nights), while Turkish visitors averaged only 1.4 nights per visit. These findings align with recent trends, including the renewed participation of Ohrid hoteliers at the Utrecht tourism fair in January 2024, reflecting the continued strategic relevance of the Dutch market.

Table 1: Overview of North Macedonia's participation in international tourism fairs (2013–2023)

2013 Utrecht, Vienna, Istanbul, Helsinki, Warsaw, Brussels, Milan, Sofia, Belgrade, Berlin, Gothenburg, Tokyo, Poznan, Kunming, Izmir;
2014 Utrecht, Vienna, Istanbul, Helsinki, Brussels, Sofia, Belgrade, Berlin, Moscow, London, Gothenburg, Tokyo, Milan, Poznan, Izmir;
2015 Utrecht, Istanbul, Helsinki, Brussels, Sofia, Belgrade, Berlin, Moscow, London, Gothenburg, Tokyo, Rimini, Paris;
2016 Utrecht, Istanbul, Ljubljana, Brussels, Sofia, Belgrade, Berlin, Moscow, Bucharest, Pristina, Tokyo, Paris, Rimini, London, Warsaw, Bremen, Lucerne, Kragujevac, Barcelona, Izmir, Copenhagen;
2017 Utrecht, Istanbul, New York, Bratislava, Zurich, Ljubljana, Brussels, Tel Aviv, Prague, Sofia, Herning, Belgrade, Budapest, Berlin, Moscow, Gothenburg, Zagreb, Pristina, Tirana, Dubai, Tokyo, Paris, Singapore, Rimini, London, Warsaw, Shanghai, Barcelona, Izmir, Bucharest;
2018 Utrecht, Brussels, Berlin, Tel Aviv, Zagreb, Belgrade, Sofia, Istanbul, Helsinki, Rimini, Warsaw, Izmir and Tirana;
2019 Utrecht, Brussels, Berlin, Zagreb, Belgrade, Sofia, Tirana, London, Warsaw, Istanbul;
2020 Madrid, Ljubljana, Istanbul, Sofia, Belgrade;
2021 COVID-19, ITB BERLIN 2021 (virtual edition);
2022 Istanbul, Madrid, Belgrade, Rimini, London, Warsaw, Izmir, Dubai Expo;
2023 Istanbul, Madrid, Berlin, Belgrade, Tirana.

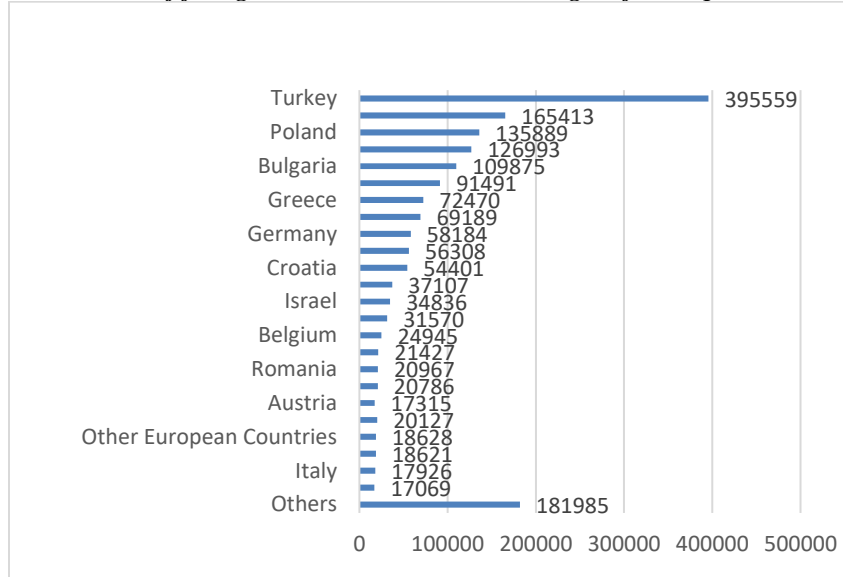
Source: Authors' research based on structured data requested from the Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism

Table 2: Number of foreign tourists in the Republic of Macedonia for the period 2013-2023



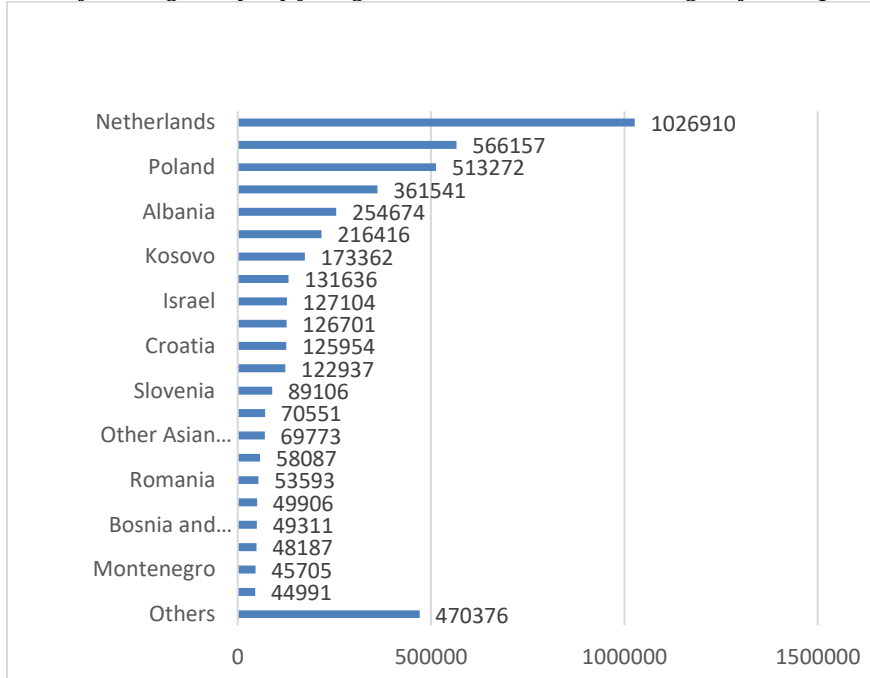
Source: Authors' research based on structured data requested from the State Statistical Office of North Macedonia

Table 3: Number of foreign tourists in the Southwest region for the period 2013-2023



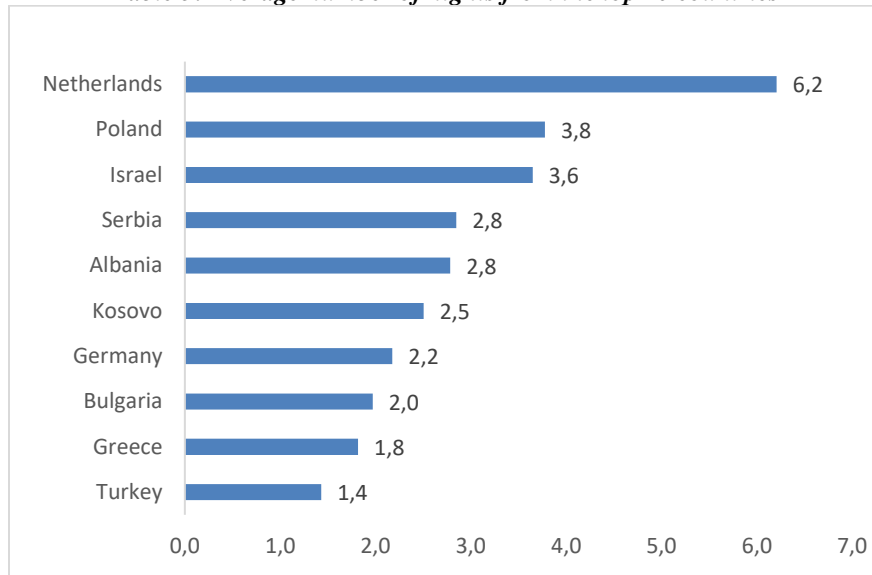
Source: Authors' research based on structured data requested from the State Statistical Office of North Macedonia

Table 4: Number of overnight stays by foreign tourists in the Southwest region for the period 2013-2023



Source: Authors' research based on structured data requested from the State Statistical Office of North Macedonia

Table 5: Average number of nights from the top 10 countries



Source: Authors' research based on structured data requested from the State Statistical Office of North Macedonia

4. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study confirm that international promotional activities, particularly tourism fair participation, have a measurable influence on the visibility and attractiveness of Ohrid as a UNESCO destination. The upward trend in foreign tourist arrivals and overnight stays between 2013 and 2023—especially among Dutch, Polish, and Turkish visitors—aligns with periods of intensified promotional engagement.

The differential ranking between tourist arrivals and overnight stays suggests nuanced traveler behavior, such as longer stays among Dutch visitors and shorter visits from Turkish tourists. This insight supports strategic differentiation in marketing efforts based on source market characteristics and travel motivations. The consistent interest from Israeli tourists and their high average stay further reinforces the value of targeted engagement in specific niche segments.

The lack of promotional presence in neighboring Greece contrasts with sustained visitation, hinting at strong cultural or religious travel patterns independent of formal campaigns. This indicates the potential for organically driven tourism flows that may still benefit from tailored promotional reinforcement.

Regional data emphasize Ohrid's dominant role within the South-West planning region, showcasing its function not only as a heritage site but also as a central hub for international tourism. The continued participation of local stakeholders—such as hoteliers—in fairs like Utrecht reflects adaptive behavior and recognition of market dynamics.

Overall, the results highlight the strategic value of consistent, culturally aligned, and data-informed promotion. They suggest that fair-based representation remains a relevant mechanism for positioning heritage destinations globally, especially when supported by multi-level institutional coordination and responsive campaign design.

5. CONCLUSIONS

Based on literature review, official data from the Municipality of Ohrid, the Agency for Promotion and Support of Tourism, and MAKSTAT, as well as own analysis, the hypothesis that international fair promotion positively influences the number of foreign tourist visits and overnight stays is confirmed. Promotional activities during fair events notably increase destination visibility and facilitate outreach to wider audiences, raising awareness of Ohrid's natural and cultural assets.

Promotion of Ohrid's unique heritage—including historical churches, monasteries, archaeological sites, and natural landmarks such as Lake Ohrid and Galicica National Park—positions the city as a rare UNESCO site with mixed status. These activities contribute to attracting new markets and diversifying visitor profiles, which benefits the local population and supports regional economic development.

Fair participation also enables the presentation of active tourism products, cultural events such as the Ohrid Summer Festival, traditional craftsmanship like Ohrid pearl making, and gastronomic experiences. Strategic representation

tailored to key markets and visitor interests reinforces destination competitiveness and fosters valuable partnerships with media, travel agencies, and international stakeholders.

The study highlights the need for well-timed, data-driven promotional planning. Cases like Turkish tourists—who often visit without staying overnight—illustrate the importance of aligning promotional efforts with desired behavioral outcomes. Poorly coordinated campaigns risk contributing to seasonal overcrowding and over-tourism.

There remains a lack of advanced evaluative research (e.g., cost-benefit analyses) within public institutions. Similar observations are made by Lee and Pritchard (2021), who emphasize the strategic importance of integrated promotional planning and impact assessment in World Heritage destinations. Future efforts should combine traditional promotional formats with innovative tools and digital channels, maintaining alignment with UNESCO recommendations and strategic collaboration with neighboring Albania. Joint campaigns and shared cultural offers can enhance the region's year-round appeal, exemplified by initiatives like "365 Days of Unveiling Wonders."

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